

*Sutter's Fort
State Historic Park
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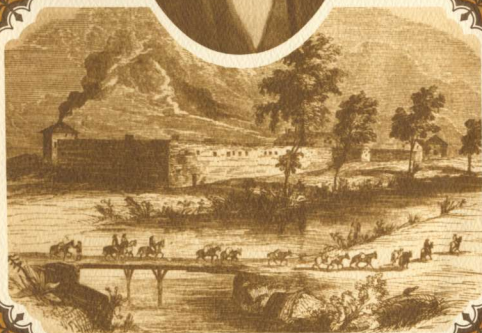
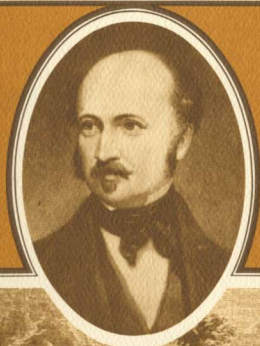
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SUTTER'S FORT

State Historic Park



SUTTER'S FORT
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SUTTER'S FORT

State Historic Park

The spirit of the old west lives on at Sutter's Fort State Historic Park. Many of John Sutter's dreams and the dreams of other bold adventurers in the American West can still be seen, felt, and appreciated with special clarity within the walls of the old fort: dreams of empire, power, prestige, and wealth. Sutter's own personal dream also included unstinting hospitality toward all who came to him in need. That hospitality, together with the discovery of gold, led to the downfall of California's ultimate dreamer, John Augustus Sutter.

Step through the fort gates and learn more about the old west, and about Sutter and his fabulous ambitions.

The Man



Sutter as a young man

John Augustus Sutter was born in Kandern, in the Duchy of Baden, to Swiss-German parents in 1803. In 1826 while working as a clerk in Bergdorf in the Swiss Canton of Berne, he married Annette Dubeld. Soon afterward he opened his own dry-goods and drapery shop.

He worked hard and also served as an officer in the Berne infantry reserve. For a time he did very well in business, but then even as his family obligations continued to grow, he began to suffer financial reverses. In May 1834, Sutter fled his bad debts, left his wife and five children, and set out to make his fortune in America.

Sutter arrived in New York in July, 1834, and headed west. He first settled in Missouri and from there joined a trading caravan to Santa Fe. Later, after losing a business in Westport, Kansas, he traveled with the American Fur Company traders to the Rockies and then on to the Hudson's Bay Company headquarters at Fort Vancouver. He was trying to reach California but was advised that it was too dangerous to travel over the Siskiyou Mountains in winter.

Still anxious to reach California, Sutter found a roundabout way of getting there. In the late fall of 1838 he sailed on the Hudson's Bay Company ship, the *Columbia*, to Honolulu, Hawaii. Three months later, he sailed to Sitka, Alaska, on the bark, *Clementine*. Part of his future colonizing work force were indentured Hawaiians, two of whom were women.

Sutter finally reached California on the first of July 1839. He arrived in San Francisco, (then called Yerba Buena) but was told that he would have to obtain official permission from the governor in order to settle permanently in what was then the Mexican province of Alta California. Sutter therefore sailed down the coast to Monterey, which was then the capital, and presented his credentials to Governor Juan B. Alvarado. In his best diplomatic manner, using everything he had learned about the needs of the province, he described his plans for settlement in California's great central valley, which was then beyond the established frontier of Mexican settlement. Alvarado liked his proposal and granted him a passport.

On July 7, Sutter returned to Yerba Buena in the role of a congenial businessman, gentleman, and military officer. He called on the leading residents of the town and using the letters of introduction he had accumulated during his recent travels, established credit as he went. He called on Mariano G. Vallejo, Don Ignacio Martinez and the Russian Governor of Fort Ross, Baron Alexander G. Rotcheff.

On August 8, Sutter sailed from Yerba Buena with a flotilla of three vessels and a party of about eighteen people bound for the central valley by way of the Sacramento River. Near their destination, they encountered a group of nearly two hundred Indians who appeared hostile. Sutter was undaunted. He landed, unarmed and alone, assured the Indians of his eternal friendship, and invited them to visit the outpost he was about to establish.

In late August, after sailing from the Sacramento into the American River, the party landed about a mile from where Sutter's Fort stands today. They immediately made camp and offered gifts to the curious Indians. Soon afterward, the situation was sufficiently calm that Sutter was able to send half of his crew back to Yerba Buena for more supplies.

The Dream

By 1841, a fort made of adobe brick was under construction, and crops were planted. The walls of the fort were 2.5 feet thick and from 15 to 18 feet high. The compound was 320 feet long, 150 feet wide, and contained a three-story central building, which Sutter used as his headquarters.

Sutter greatly enjoyed the role of host — graciously welcoming all who came to his fort to help him harvest what he considered to be the real wealth of California: grapes, wheat, and other crops, huge herds of cattle, and the incredibly prolific salmon runs that crowded the undisturbed and unpolluted freshwater streams of California. He dreamed of an independent financial empire and proudly wore clothing with a military cut.

On August 29, 1840, Sutter became a naturalized citizen of Mexico and in September was appointed Justice of the Peace and official representative of the government.

The New Helvetia (New Switzerland) grant, 47,827 acres, was given to Sutter by Governor Alvarado in 1841. That same year, Sutter purchased Fort Ross from the Russians for \$30,000.00. He made a down payment of \$2,000.00 and agreed to pay the remainder in crops and goods over the next few years. At times he had as many as 350 Native Americans working on or near Sutter's Fort. He trained them as soldiers and vaqueros. He wrote letters everywhere, even to Europe, recruiting talent for New Helvetia. And always,



Fort Ross

he generously provided food, lodging, and supplies to all who entered his fort.

In July, 1844, Governor Micheltorena appointed Sutter captain of the Sacramento Company of the Defenders of the Fatherland and then, later that year, called on Sutter for assistance in putting down a revolt against his administration. He rewarded Sutter with the additional "Sobrante land grant," which consisted of 96,800 acres.

This was the golden time for John Sutter. All his dreams were coming true. He owned a virtual empire — some 150,000 acres of land. He also owned large herds of cattle and other livestock. Hundreds of acres had been plowed and planted. And he had developed shipping, tanning and fishery industries.

In 1846 Sutter suddenly found himself caught up in two events of far ranging significance. In June, during the Bear Flag Revolt, he found himself an almost helpless bystander. He had always been sympathetic to the United States, but he was also friendly with Mexico and represented the Mexican government through his militia and through his authority to issue passports and conduct official governmental census surveys. Because of this, U.S. Army Captain John C. Fremont did not trust him and arbitrarily decided to put Edward Kern in temporary command of Sutter's Fort.

In September 1846 Sutter heard that eighty-nine members of the Donner party were behind schedule in their crossing of the Nevada desert. Sutter sent seven mule loads of dried beef and flour to aid them, but the party moved too slowly and was caught in heavy snow on the east side of the Sierra Nevada crest. In November, Sutter outfitted a rescue party under James Reed, with a mule and twenty-six pack horses loaded with dried beef and flour. Reed was a member of the Donner party, who had reached California ahead of the main group after being banished because of a killing. Despite heroic efforts to reach the Donner Party (which included his own wife and children) heavy snow forced Reed to turn back. Sutter furnished supplies for four more rescue attempts but only the last two, led by James Reed and, later LeGros O'Fallon, succeeded in reaching the last forty-seven survivors. They finally reached Sutter's Fort in March and April of 1847. By then, Sutter had regained command of his fort.

The Shattered Dream

As part of his imperial dream for California, Sutter had envisioned timber cutting and large lumber mills. In 1847, he signed a contract with James Marshall to build a sawmill on land Sutter had leased from the Coloma Indians. On January 24, 1848, while engaged in the mill-building project, Marshall discovered gold. Sutter knew immediately that the news of gold might well destroy his empire, and he therefore tried to keep the gold discovery secret. But news of such



James Marshall



John Augustus Sutter Jr.



Sam Brannan

riches could not be kept quiet for long and within a few weeks the great California gold rush was on.

By May, Sutter's workers were leaving for the gold fields. Two thirds of his wheat crop went unharvested, and other activities stopped as well, though Sutter tried hard to keep things going normally amid the increasing chaos and confusion. Sutter's one hope was that his son, August (John Augustus Sutter, Jr.), who had arrived from Switzerland, would be able to put his business affairs in order. Leaving the fort in the hands of a caretaker, and turning over all of his business including his heavily mortgaged land to his son, he set off for Coloma to see if he could salvage something there. While he was in Coloma, Sam Brannan convinced August Sutter that Sutterville, the new city his father was planning, should be built between the fort and the river instead of on higher ground away from the river as John Sutter intended. When Sutter returned from a winter in Coloma, he discovered that his long dreamed of city was being built on the wrong site, and had been named Sacramento instead of Sutterville! Sutter felt betrayed by his son, and the rift continued to grow, a situation that was greatly to the advantage of every unscrupulous business operator in the area.

The city of Sacramento grew and prospered, but Sutter's dreams continued to unravel. In fact, 1849 was an emotional disaster for Sutter. Living on credit, Sutter continued to sink ever further into debt. August Sutter salvaged what he could. He leased out every room in Sutter's Fort and then sold it for \$7,000.00. August also persuaded his father to move to Hock Farm, near Marysville.

In September, John Sutter was named an honorary member of the California Constitutional Convention in Monterey. Pleased by this recognition, he ran for governor of California but lost. Because of his past relations with various Indian groups, however, Sutter was named Indian sub-agent for

the Sacramento Valley, an honor and position he soon declined because of health and financial problems.



Hock Farm, Sutter's Home near Marysville

In 1850, Annette and the remaining children, Anna Eliza, Emil Viktor and Wilhelm Alphonse, joined Sutter and the family's oldest son, August, at Hock Farm. The youngest son, Carl Albert, had been an infant when Sutter left Switzerland, and had died at the age of six. Once in residence together at Hock Farm, Sutter's extravagant hospitality was sharply curtailed by his wife, who worried over every penny and was very reluctant to borrow money.

Starting in 1848 after the discovery of gold, squatters began to settle on Sutter's land, butcher his cattle, and steal his horses. The squatters had originally organized in order to establish mine claims and settle disputes, but before long large numbers of them began to move down out of the mountains and into the valley. Sutter asked that the United States Government recognize his land grants from Mexico for Sobrante and New Helvetia, but until this was done, it was difficult to enforce his rights against the squatters.

Sutter's love of military pomp and circumstance provided him with great solace in 1853 when the Legislature appointed him Major General and gave him command of the California Militia. He enjoyed ceremonial military events and took great delight in wearing a uniform.



Mrs. Sutter

In 1855, the United States Land Commission approved the New Helvetia and Sobrante land grants but the well organized squatters appealed the decision and refused to move. In 1858, the United States Supreme Court confirmed the New Helvetia claim, but denied the Sobrante grant on the basis that Governor Micheltorena had abandoned his capital at the time he made that grant to Sutter. It was the final blow for Sutter's shaky finances! Much of the Sobrante grant had already been sold and Sutter had to repay those who had purchased the land.

In 1864, recognizing Sutter's many contributions to the development of California, the State Legislature voted him a pension of \$15,000.00 payable in monthly installments of \$250.00. This pension was originally intended to last just five years, but was later extended.

When the barn and other buildings at Hock Farm were destroyed by fire in 1865, John and Annette Sutter moved to Washington, D.C., and never returned to California. Sutter believed that the U.S. government should compensate him for the loss of his Sobrante grant and for lack of legal protection with regard to his other properties. When his demands were not met, he stayed on in Washington, D.C. and kept on demanding compensation.

After five years of hotel living in Washington D.C., the Sutters built a beautiful brick home in the village of Lititz, Pennsylvania. Their three grandchildren, August Sutter's son and two daughters, lived with them and attended private schools. Lititz was considered a health spa and the Sutters seem to have enjoyed living there. Sutter was still celebrated from time to time as the "Father of California". He was also honored by the Pioneers of the Territorial Days of California and elected president of the Associated Pioneers.

His prolonged and frustrating battle with the United States Congress, however, eventually took its toll. He had the support of many California pioneers, including General Sherman, Mark Twain, and other famous men, but Congress adjourned on June 16, 1880, without passing the bill that would have awarded Sutter \$50,000.00 for his various losses. On June 18, 1880, after fourteen years of frustration and disappointment, Captain John Augustus Sutter died of heart failure at the Mades Hotel, near the Capital.

Today Sutter is often remembered only as the frustrated, discouraged, and elderly man whose dreams were destroyed by the great California gold rush. What is often overlooked is that he dared to dream of riches far beyond mere gold. He dreamed of a whole society of men, women, and children, living handsomely in a land of plenty. He recognized and admired California's extraordinary natural resources, its magnificent combination of rich soil and gentle climate, a land that could produce enormous crops of fruit and grain, a land blessed with fabulously rich fisheries, and grazing land for countless sheep, cattle, and horses. Today, with the gold rush long since a matter of history, it is easy to see that Sutter was essentially correct. His boldest and most visionary dreams have been realized and surpassed.



The Fort

By the late 1850s about all that was left of Sutter's Fort was the central building. The Native Sons of the Golden West purchased it in 1890 and donated it to the State of California in 1891. The California Legislature agreed to accept, reconstruct, and maintain the fort. Reconstruction began in 1891. In 1947, Sutter's Fort became part of the California State Park System.

Basis of the current reconstruction is the Grunsky map, but the ongoing Sutter's Fort Docents' Rehabilitation Program is based on the Kunzel map, published in Darmstadt, Germany, in 1848.



Central Building in the 1880s

The Fort Today

As you walk through the gates of the fort, you step back into the year 1846 and see history unfolding before you as the past is recreated through various activities and programs sponsored by the Sutter's Fort staff and the Sacramento District State Parks Docent Association. The docents are a group of volunteers who give their time in order to share their love and knowledge of Sutter's Fort, through demonstrations, staff support and ongoing presentations to the visiting public.

For further information about the Docent Association please feel free to contact any docent or member of the park staff, or write to Historic Sites Docent Coordinator, 802 "N" Street, Sacramento, CA 95814.

The Environmental Living Program

California history is a required subject in elementary grade classes throughout California. This history comes alive through the "Environmental Living" program at Sutter's Fort. As part of this program each Thursday during the school year, groups of 4th, 5th and 6th graders spend a day and night at the fort, living just as the pioneers did in 1846.



The Living History Program

At least 10 days a year, Sutter's Fort comes alive with re-enactments of certain special events that occurred in the fort's busiest year, 1846. You are asked to step back in time with the living history docents as they spin, weave, dip candles, drill, and live the everyday events of life at the fort with their host and protector, John Sutter.



Mobile Living History Program

Each October, a group of staff and Sutter's Fort docents, dress up like hunters, traders and trappers and re-enact a hunting trip along the banks of the Sacramento River. During this month-long trip from Red Bluff to Sacramento, they set up established camps along the route, and otherwise interpret the life and times of the fur trappers or mountain men who entered California's great central valley during the 1830s and 1840s. Over 3,000 children attend this program each October.

Demonstration Days

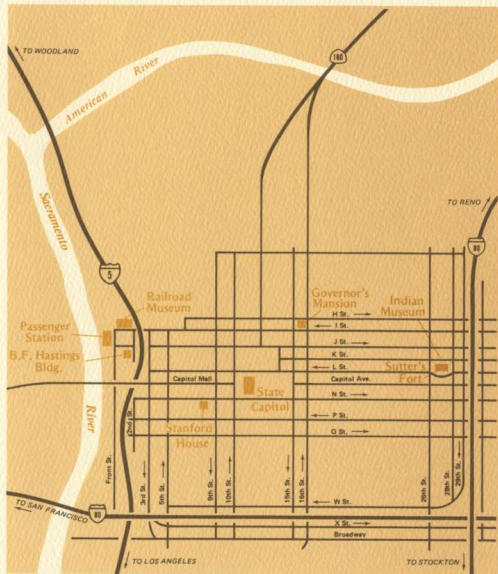
Dressed in their pioneer costumes, the Sutter's Fort docents are ready, willing and eager to share their skills with visitors. Please feel free to ask questions as the docents bake, spin, weave, make candles and barrels. A carpenter and blacksmith will also be happy to discuss their work.

Sutter's Fort State Historic Park is open daily, except on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day, from 10:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. The last self-guided tour begins at 4:15 p.m. School and tour group reservations can be made by calling the Sacramento District Reservation Office at (916) 445-4209; the hearing impaired call (916) 324-2667.



Chronology

- 1803: John Augustus Sutter was born at Kandern, Duchy of Baden to Swiss-German parents.
- 1826: Sutter married Annette Dubeld and opened his own dry-goods and drapery shop.
- 1834: Sutter fled his bad debts, arrived in the United States and headed west.
- 1839: August: Sutter sailed from Yerba Buena (San Francisco) with a flotilla of three vessels and a party of about eighteen people. The latter part of August: The party sailed up the Sacramento River to the American River and landed about a mile from where the fort stands today.
- 1840: Sutter began construction of his adobe fort.
August 29: Sutter became a Mexican citizen.
- 1841: The New Helvetia (New Switzerland) land grant, 47,827 acres was awarded to Sutter by Governor Juan B. Alvarado. Sutter purchased Fort Ross.
- Sutter's Fort began to be known as a place of welcome and refuge for pioneers as Sutter provided free shelter and supplies.
- 1844: Governor Manuel Micheltorena, who had appointed Sutter Captain of the Sacramento Company of the Defenders of the Fatherland, awarded him the Sobrante land grant, 96,800 acres.
- 1846: June: Sutter openly declared support for the American cause, but John C. Fremont placed Edward Kern in command of the fort.
- 1847: Sutter furnished supplies for five rescue attempts of the Donner Party and later gave refuge to many members of the party at Sutter's Fort.
- 1847: March: Sutter regained control of his fort.
August: Sutter signed a contract with James Marshall to build a sawmill at Coloma.
- 1848: January 24: Marshall discovered gold. Sutter's laborers soon began to desert him. Unscrupulous men began to swindle Sutter.
September 14: John Augustus Sutter, Jr., arrived from Switzerland and tried to salvage his father's business affairs.
- 1849: John Augustus Sutter, Jr., hired Lt. William H. Warner to lay out the new city of Sacramento.
Captain John Sutter moved to Hock Farm, his property near Marysville.
Sutter's Fort was sold for \$7,000.
- 1850: Annette Sutter and their remaining children arrived at Hock Farm to live with Sutter.
- 1865: Squatters took over Sutter's land throughout the Sacramento Valley. John and Annette Sutter moved to Washington, D.C. and began a fifteen year pursuit of compensation for losses of California property due to lack of legal protection.
- 1880: June 16: Congress adjourned without passing the bill that would have awarded Sutter \$50,000.
June 18: John Augustus Sutter died of heart failure.



Photos courtesy of Patty Posner, Ken McKowen, Tom Meyer and the California Department of Parks and Recreation.